

# SEXUAL VIOLENCE & THE WORKPLACE

## Overview

*Sexual violence is a societal issue that requires systemic change. Sexual violence does not occur in a vacuum. It is influenced by our larger social systems, including the workplace. In a typical week in the United States, the average worker spends approximately 55 hours, or about 33% of their time participating in work-related activities (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010, p. 2). Therefore, the work environment plays a significant role in the health and well-being of employees.*

A healthy workplace can foster social, economic, and professional growth and opportunities for employees. This overview provides advocates and their allied partners with information from available research on the connections between sexual violence and the workplace. It is intended to provide a snapshot of the issue of sexual violence and the workplace and how sexual violence impacts a survivor's<sup>1</sup> employment.

Sexual violence crosses all socioeconomic lines. However, various oppressions such as racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, and ageism can create barriers that might be exploited by people who commit sexual violence. For example, traditionally oppressed groups, such as undocumented and documented immigrants (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2010), people working in the restaurant and

service industry (The Restaurant Opportunities Center United et al., 2012) and people living in poverty are at an increased risk for sexual victimization in schools, at home, and in the workplace (Jewkes, Sen, & Garcia-Moreno, 2002).

Not everyone who has experienced sexual violence is affected in the same way; however, sexual violence can have profound effects on a person's employment regardless of when or where the incident occurred. Sexual violence does not have to occur at the workplace or be perpetrated by a coworker to impact the survivor's employment. When sexual violence occurs in the workplace, employees can feel threatened, harassed, and unsafe. Absenteeism, interrupted job performance, and loss of experienced employees are only some of the costs that employers bear as a direct result of sexual violence.

<sup>1</sup>Throughout this document, the terms "victim" and "survivor" are used interchangeably to be inclusive of the various ways people who have experienced sexual violence may identify.



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## Sexual violence & the workplace research statistics

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The connections between sexual violence and the workplace are understudied. However, existing research can help inform advocacy and prevention efforts.

While working or on duty, American employees experienced 36,500 rapes and sexual assaults from 1993 to 1999 (Duhart, 2001). Women are the victims in 80% of rapes and sexual assaults that take place in the workplace (Duhart, 2001). Between 2005 and 2009, rape/sexual assault accounted for 2.3% of all nonfatal violence in the workplace (Harrell, 2011). One study of employed women found that 38% had experienced sexual harassment in the workplace (Potter & Banyard, 2011).

Sexual harassment in the workplace also is a serious concern for people receiving public assistance. Research shows that individuals who move from public assistance into unsubsidized employment often experience sexual harassment in the workplace. One study found that between 8% and 13% of individuals returning to public assistance have reported experiencing sexual harassment at work (Siegel & Abbott, 2007). In traditionally male-dominated professions, such as in the military, women could experience more sexual harassment and violence. In fiscal year 2010, 3,158 military sexual assaults were reported; about a quarter of those occurred during deployment in a combat zone (U.S. Department of Defense, Sexual Assault Prevention and Response [SAPRO] 2011). The DOD however, estimates that only about 13.5% of survivors report an assault (SAPRO, 2011). For more information on sexual violence in the military see the *Special collection: Sexual violence in the*

*military* (National Sexual Violence Resource Center [NSVRC], 2011).

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## The impact of sexual violence

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### Interrupted work as a result of sexual violence

Sexual violence can cause interruptions in a person's life. It is estimated that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is likely in 50% to 95% of rape cases (Heise, Ellsberg, & Gottemoeller 1999). In one study, 50% of rape victims lost or were forced to quit their jobs in the year following their rapes because of the severity of their reactions (Ellis, Atkeson, & Calhoun, 1981). The National Violence Against Women Survey found that more than 19% of adult female rape survivors and more than 9% of adult male rape survivors said their victimizations caused them to lose time from work (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). More than 21% of women who were raped by an intimate partner lost time from paid work, with eight days as the average number of days lost (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2003). Sexual violence that has occurred in the past also can affect current employment; one study found that childhood sexual abuse can often result in difficulties in the workplace in adulthood, leading to poor job performance and high work absenteeism (Anda et al., 2004).

### Financial losses associated with sexual violence

Sexual violence creates a significant financial burden on health care, criminal justice, education, child welfare and other systems.



In 2008, total victimization costs of each rape were about \$151,423 (DeLisi et al., 2010). Lifetime income loss due to sexual violence in adolescence has been estimated to be \$241,600 (MacMillan, 2000). A 2009 study of the cost of sexual violence in Iowa estimated the cost of lost work due to sexual violence to be at more than \$130 million (Yang, Zhang, Miller, & LeHew, 2012). Sexual assault victims lose approximately \$2,200 due to decreased productivity and lost wages in the aftermath of sexual violence (MacMillan, 2000). In a 1994 study, the cost of sexual

harassment in the federal government was an estimated \$327 million; this includes the cost of job turnover (\$24.7 million), sick leave taken because of the harassment (\$14.9 million), and productivity losses (\$287.5 million) (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1995).

This overview is part of a *Sexual Violence & the Workplace Information Packet*. Contact the National Sexual Violence Resource Center for more information: 877-739-3895 or <http://www.nsvrc.org>.

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